USDA ACTIONS TO SUPPORT CONTINUED DIALOGUE AND CONSTRUCTIVE COEXISTENCE IN U.S. AGRICULTURE

The following is a set of actions Secretary Vilsack is announcing to address certain issues not within the Roundup Ready alfalfa (RRA) deregulation decision itself but very relevant to USDA's overall mission, authorities and existing policies. These issues are relevant to the cultivation of alfalfa and relate to economic issues raised in USDA's Environmental Impact Statement prepared for the glyphosate tolerant alfalfa.

Collectively these items are intended to bolster the spirit of constructive coexistence among diverse segments of US agriculture. It is vital for USDA to strengthen the varied segments of agriculture through cooperation and coordination.

The actions outlined below use our strong reliance on science to help bolster coexistence. They respond to stakeholder comments in the RRA regulatory record, as well as ideas and proposals generated in conversations among GE, non-GE, and organic businesses and groups.

The actions being announced today strengthen our commitment to ensuring that farmers have the freedom and ability to choose what they will grow and offer additional opportunities for public involvement as we continue to innovate and improve American agriculture.

Maintaining purity of non-GE alfalfa seed, from germplasm to commercial use

- We will take steps to safeguard the long-term quality of alfalfa seed stored in USDA germplasm banks. Alfalfa germplasm is currently propagated by scientists in USDA's Agricultural Research Service (ARS) at Prosser, WA . ARS will pilot-test regenerating the alfalfa germplasm collection at a remote field site in Central Ferry, WA, with a climate strongly resembling that of Prosser. Our researchers will investigate how to optimize production of high purity alfalfa seed with additional protocols at both Prosser and the very isolated location in Central Ferry.

- One key aspect of strengthening coexistence is ensuring that all farmers have the best seed for their particular farming operations and that we serve the needs of all stakeholders as we oversee and strengthen the national plant germplasm system. To this end, USDA will renew and reconstitute the National Germplasm Resources Advisory Committee (NGRAC) so that we can:
    - Ensure that there is adequate opportunity for cross-sector stakeholder and customer input as USDA maintains U.S. germplasm collections
    - Develop a broad strategy for maintaining plant biodiversity available to agriculture
    - Determine how best to work with the private sector while also strengthening public sector plant breeding to ensure that there is an adequate diversity of high quality seeds for all U.S. farmers.

Improving stewardship practices and developing new tools to lessen the risk of gene flow in alfalfa

- In research jointly funded by ARS and our National Institute for Food and Agriculture (NIFA), ARS corn geneticists have identified genes that cause corn lines to be protected from unwanted pollination by foreign pollen. These genes are being incorporated into corn lines to make them non-receptive to transgenic pollen. ARS will convene a workshop with maize and alfalfa

geneticists to determine if knowledge about these corn genes can be applied to develop a similar genetic mechanism for restricting out-crossing of alfalfa with foreign pollen.

- I have also directed our Small Business Innovation Research (SBIR) program under the National Institute for Food and Agriculture (NIFA) to issue a call for proposals for (a) improved detection of transgenes in alfalfa seeds and hay; and (b) improving handling of forage seeds, from seed production to marketing.

- NIFA grants already fund alfalfa breeding/improvement programs at nine Land Grant Universities around the United States. USDA will explore opportunities to strengthen the role of these institutions as a resource for public sector alfalfa breeding and seed production for specific markets, including increasing seed purity measures at these breeding sites.

Assisting cooperation and coexistence among alfalfa producers

- Our research agencies will work to identify projects for enhancing the coexistence of biotech and conventional alfalfa. USDA researchers at Madison, Wisconsin, are already determining the effect of landscape architecture and field design on gene flow mediated by pollinators (honey bees) of alfalfa. Other USDA researchers are collaborating on longer-term monitoring of field data where biotech Bt cotton and corn are grown. Such research may help us plan monitoring efforts on pollen flow from GE alfalfa fields. USDA has a Biotechnology Risk Assessment Grant Program, which can be mobilized, with input from regulatory colleagues, to support shorter term risk assessment projects for biotech alfalfa. The Biotechnology Risk Assessment Grants (BRAG) program will commit $1.0 million for the project: GE Alfalfa Priority (restricting pollen flow, promoting co-existence of production). This could include research proposals to evaluate and possibly improve the reliability of model predictions for pollen flow and gene transfer from GE forage alfalfa fields into alfalfa seed production fields, using data obtained through field monitoring.

- In addition, USDA has voluntary audit based programs administered by the Agricultural Marketing Service (AMS) that we will make available to industry to provide independent third-party verification of the Association of Official Seed Certifying Agencies' (AOSCA) Alfalfa Seed Stewardship (ASSP) Program, the National Alfalfa and Forage Alliance's (NAFA) Best Management Practices (BMP), or other programs designed to promote the effective marketing of alfalfa. Our experience shows that these non-regulatory services build market confidence by verifying for domestic and international customers compliance with specific contractual or trade-based processes.

- I am also announcing that we are reviving USDA's Advisory Committee on Biotechnology and 21st Century Agriculture, or AC21.

- The AC21, which in the past has taken a big-picture look at the interactions of biotechnology with agriculture, will continue to provide USDA with guidance on a specific, important topic:

    - What practical measures and effective tools can be developed to strengthen coexistence, so that USDA can better assure that we can meet domestic and

international demands in GE-sensitive markets while allowing continued production for other markets?

- We will soon be requesting nominations for committee members to provide us with the broad range of expertise we need.

- Because the work of the AC21 and the work of the NGRAC will intertwine, and the AC21 will address coexistence issues outside of seed issues, we are exploring ways to ensure that the two committees can benefit from each other's work.